Something Solid: Henniker Heat

Boston

"I suppose he told you that I landed
between his legs like a roguish girl…
well, you could say it happened that
way. You could also say he sold me
on the idea of veined trade, or that his
musky Scotch breath excreted wafts of
blue bloodiness into me. You are perverse
to ask me these things, moon peering over
your shoulder like another rogue. For now,
he lays upon an altar you don't know is
there: drunk, blue." The director called
cut; stagehands shuffled towards cigarettes.
I wandered down the aisle towards the stage,
about to land, looking for your money-shot—

found a ticket to Boston, first-class, reservations
for a four-star Boston hotel, invitation for an
audience with a Brahmin princess. The dream,
I thought, continues, as I saw you sit on the stage,
begin to peruse a style magazine which has now
been discontinued, and I laughed, as there is no
fashion in a freezing New England winter, but
your breasts, which are considerable, do get extra-
perky, and when you try to sit on my face, I just
might let you. As for your old rival, she's got
wings to star in a musical over in Cambridge,
a version of Guys & Dolls they've got going.
It's a sparkling scene in every direction; an epoch-
making time. The cage has sixty-nine layers of gild.

Bringing Down the Light

At one point, I had a room in Henniker
overlooking the Contoocook. At night,
lights from the stores down the road (I
shopped for snacks, booze) shone on
the moving river, improving it, casting
an ethereal glow on its surface, birthing
in me a drunken high I still carry, about
New England in winter. The store-lights
here were about artifice, humanity, taking
Nature hung in one perpetual blue sky above
us, bringing down the light to create effects.
The light that most truly shone, the Contoocook
knew. She was an admixture of dark and light,
lived in the river. That's a metaphor. Or water.

Jim Jones

Refugee from a tempest, I arrived in New
England feeling like I conducted electricity,
like anything could happen to me. The pissed
community didn't like where I was publishing
(or, to be uncharitable but more accurate, that
I was publishing at all). I was on the phone
with the Philly arts press, right there in Henniker.
Only moments later, Mary would arrive, easily
a match for her Philly counterpart, able to wager
I'd climbed up a mountain, might be able to help
her. Jon Anderson, turns out, had become the Jim
Jones he wanted to be, followers crawling out of
his ass. Becky Hilliker's life was its own wager,
on one great poem she was depending on me

to publish. All that imagery she shared with Mary—
the water, fish, how bodies of water resonate with
women, fish also— coalesced into a sense that she
was a pistol that needed badly to be loaded. All
the action happened that summer underwater, in
cahoots with this primordial semi-darkness— Becky
talks on the phone with Gaetan in Philadelphia,
reveals for the ages that that city is no stranger to
her— Becky strips to bra and panties, rope-swings
into the Contoocook— and, of course, Mary and I
drink a concoction of pure cyanide Kool-Aid, so that
an eternity of massacres ensues between Boston
and Virginia, families wasting followers like ants. Yet I
carried with me, implicit, brotherly love for all. Or tried.

Frequencies

for Mary Walker Graham

I.

"We're at our most bestial when threatened not
with hatred but indifference; what our blood wants
is reaction of some kind." New Hampshire night,
our own reaction, you pliant, penetrable, laid out beneath me as
flies fidgeted our room, pirouetted moist air. Yet
we sank beneath bestiality to do just what indifferently
we wanted, beneath our glut of blood, so the summoned
beasts might react with this: ripped limb from limb,
buried in low-lying Virginia swamp marsh, given what
aphorism is only got in extinction, darling, as I quote
what you said at the bar before. In other words, they
hated us. The one-night stand wouldn't matter if your
brain didn't have the right words in it: stories, sequences,
slammed-down metaphors of a singed self. Frequencies.

II.

As the world between her legs tightened around
her, what she saw in bed with me was stark: okra,
stamens, roots, all that in nature coalesces in erect
growth; and a shadow father bent, then erect, then
bent again, perverse from amassing wealth in a world
whose submissiveness poisons him. Beneath the sultry,
wooded surface, what I saw was a semi-frightened
animal, along for an all-night ride (gruesomeness of
4 a.m. New Hampshire sun), knife thusly thrusting
into the backs of everyone around her, managing
to have stamina enough against constraint to take
what she was taking. The mattress thumped: above,
an angel was unable to conceal laughter, understanding
it was all in the script, including the garish sun's leer.

State of Grace

Grape soda bottle on the desk; wind, out of
Eleusis, shut the door. Our clothes came
off; your limbs spun like spokes. I peered
outside; it was light. New Hampshire summer
sun, four a.m. Poets to face at breakfast.
Workshops to sit through, lectures, but I
knew I'd never have you the right way
again, or any way. We'd done the thing
once we'd been meaning to do, so as I
stepped from the window, gazed at you
dozing, naked, I thought to myself, maybe
that's what amounts to a state of grace—
you're given something once, fully, so
that you may be satiated with it, and that's it—

Luggage

Luggage lugged in by refugees from wealthy
families lay beside the bed we occupied, to
do our dance. I saw it, in the middle of the action—
black leather, initials embossed in gold— tried
not to notice that it was sentient. It berated you,
for the duration of our tryst, delineating ways this
was a betrayal, to sleep with someone of inferior caste
stripe, with steep consequences. When a severed
head broke briefly out of a suitcase, it reminded
you, red-tongued, the debt you owed could never
be paid back, the grisliness you visited upon your
clan could never be rectified. All the severed head
looked to me like was roses with thorny stems, tied
in a knot— clairvoyantly, you saw the real deal. The sleeping roll

predicted your condition as mendicant when the sex
was over, the word passed. The abomination between
your legs could only be alleviated by the anti-Vaseline
which sat leeringly on top of the luggage pile, lubed
from yellow to fluorescent blue. The luggage, to me,
was just prejudice from a sector I chose not to understand.
All I knew is that our bodies compelled us to co-mingle.
That was enough. Off in the distance, trumpets blared
to begin a holy war. Red seas were parted. A king perused
the catalogue they'd given him, jeweled scepter scoping
out highlights. I was a pawn. He knew— if you own the guns
and the money, everything else comes, too. You, then, fell
asleep. I was entranced by the early sunlight. I thought
of states of grace, you dreamed of Red Death. More luggage.

New Hampshire

I could've used you in New
Hampshire that summer, rope-
swinging into Contoocook River,
dope-huffing out in the fields
with Jon Anderson, his gang,
your future rival (unbeknownst
to all) tapping her feet in anticipation
of new reasons to mope, make
metaphor. I could've understood
why it might be that your rival
could never be your friend—
too tense about counting her fingers,
toes, too loose on the juice, or
(cruelly, for all) maybe just right, simpatico?

Frontiersman

I was unaware, until Jon Anderson jolted us into
awareness, that there could be a baby version of
a Bowie knife. The seminar room sloped upwards
from the front; Mr. Anderson levitated, with lascivious
abandon, above us, as the baby Bowie did its mischievous
task of shearing one white slat of the blinds in half.
Jon crouched like a frontiersman skinning what itself could
have been a mischievous rattlesnake, the snakeskin a prize
or trophy to adorn an abode not much less primitive than
a tee-pee, the frontier half-conquered. I did not need
a reason, then or now, to understand why the emergence
of the baby Bowie was necessary. But I carried with me
the brotherly love that, from Philadelphia to New Hampshire,
affirmed that displayed force could be a necessary weapon among poets.

Pricey

For reasons pertaining to mysterious circumstances
perpetually manifesting behind her, the obvious sense
of the erotic, of us as potential lovers, never happened
with Becky and I. She was from a rich family like Mary,
or wasn't; was engaged to a newfangled Kennedy look-
alike in Boston, or wasn't; gave hints of being suspiciously
well-traveled, Boston not being her real home, or didn't;
the Becky circle game in Henniker never resolved any way.
As I watched her strip to rope-swing into the Contoocook,
there was in her physiology something desperate, something
that wanted badly out of whatever situation she was in. Swing
she did, as I had, the river briefly swallowing up the blonde
with pricey curves who no one was allowed to know that well.
Except to say that she had obviously read Mary, though the two

were wary of each other, and admired the river-deep heft, drowning
potential, of who Mary was in text, the dramatic persona she had
invented for herself— sullen, yet regal as the queen of Egypt.
Whether the pyramids for Becky were the same tropical resorts,
mansions, five-star hotels, rented yachts, and acres of plush green
as they were for Mary, in the end doesn't matter, falls away in
irrelevance. The queen's eyes direct a piercing gaze at, or into,
the female body's acknowledged or unacknowledged death-in-life,
stasis amid whatever dynamism pretends to assert its force,
horror at empty tomb-like space filled with mummies preserved
from livid memories. For the few seconds Becky was submerged
in the Contoocook, the idea of the voluptuous female was
tormented into awareness of superficiality, like a five-star hotel,
which offers a continental breakfast, no guarantee of morning sun.

Stetson

Understanding how narratives intersect, wanting
also, in this book, to stay crisp about telling the truth,
it stands to reason it should be known that at this time,
Abby would have no idea I was in Henniker, or what or
where Henniker was, or about Becky and the rest. Abby's
knowledge of my day-to-day life was so-so, as was mine
of hers. Mary, Philadelphia Mary, was off our maps then
too, having briefly sold her wares back to a semi-forgiving
family, eager to bury her in money and marriage lectures.
Mary was a sucker to briefly believe, too. Abby, I now
believe, would've wanted to paint the Contoocook, and Becky,
and would remain unsatisfied that Becky continue as anything
but one of her girls. Mary, Boston Mary, was slightly too mean,
too hard. The juxtaposing of Abby and Henniker, in fact,

involves an Abby-style catalogue of how the place looked being
created, even as that task be placed in inexpert hands. Pivot-
pointed by the campus we occupied, the first point of interest
were several streets, placed at a close-but-odd angle to said
campus, of the kind of ornate, plantation worthy houses you
might associate with Tennessee Williams plays. In fact, one
spook of Henniker was a ricochet to places like Tennessee,
or the Great Plains. You might hear, in Henniker, country
music at any moment, or see a Stetson hat. Home on the range.
The campus, linked to the town by a paved bridge, was built
on the basic principle of the down-home. Abby, I predict,
would've liked the river-view deck at Daniel's, the town's
premier tavern, and all the different ways the town framed
the river, including big, rustic log cabins, complete with portal-ways.

Laps

Odd, cutting in from an angle as it does to
suggest a level of eternal damnation— that what
happens in the world is often second or third tier
garbage, what could have happened consequently rules
the celestial seasonings roost— Becky, I believe, had
in her something more wild, more libidinous than Mary did.
I saw it as she stripped down by the Contoocook—
the desperation on view was part of a double-sided
coin deal, the other side of which was, or appeared
to be, ecstatic release. Mary and I were trapped in an
advanced version of a dormitory room; if I attempt
to encompass the imagined seduction of Becky, I
notice in my own physiology the sense that the river
would have to stay in view, our rite an advanced

Innisfree rite, connecting us in a vital way to the landscape.
The Becky I imagine is not a semi-frightened animal,
along for someone else's suggested ride. The metaphors
in her head are forgotten, as she channels the great
post-language wavelength of real sex. Mary's words
were herself— no more, no less. Becky chips away
at something in language she likes, but the fish in her
is fluent, past language, at the expressive motion
games beyond any articulation at all, when existence
is just doing. Our brief tribe manned fields usually
empty at night— I extend my imagination back to
those fields, to find if this fish is striped, in the secret
way female fish are striped, to accommodate what laps
we might do, so anticipate the gruesome New Hampshire sun.

Suffering Nature-Goddess

For the male of the species to gaze into the swamp or
morass of female subjectivity— when the male would be
me, I first notice this peculiarity— that Becky and Mary
seem to station themselves so uncannily close together, when
the creation of text is the issue. The acknowledgement of
bodies of water as an objective correlative is nothing new.
Why the city of Boston engendered female textual twins,
to take bodies of water and add to them a note of dementia,
horror, ominous lubricity, shot through, in a contradictory
way, with equally intense sensuality, transcendentalized into
phenomenological plays in self-created textual zones, lifted
into an ether of the female body magnified a thousand-fold—
suffering nature-goddesses, crucifixion by absorption in nature
nailed to brains— is difficult or impossible to know. I do know

that the zone I write from has more city in it, less nature. I could
never be a suffering nature-god. But perhaps at the end it is about
New England itself, what the ricochet of all those long winters
built into these poetesses, about mythologies found most appealing,
also about suffering and redemption. The night at Daniel's in Henniker
Becky sat caddy-corner to me, in a pink polo shirt with the collar
up, as I had seen the stiffer kids do at U of Penn, I understood that,
as postures go, Becky was too real, too human, to really pull it off.
No one thought she was a liar or a poseur. I simply watched, as she
made her exit for the night at around eleven, that she was slightly
downtrodden with alcohol and loneliness. Mary was a more dire open
wound— alcohol and loneliness meant she might just take someone
home with her. Someone had to stop the bleeding. Becky was able
to hide the loose blood. But the core— suffering nature-goddess— they shared.

To Jon Anderson

I have to laugh, Jon, to remember how
the moon hung over the open field
behind the river, where we all sat, smoking
your spliffs, reciting poems, and, for me,
checking in with the Philly squad to see
if everything remained in place. What's
funny is that what we never found out
remains the most important thing— how
far would or did they follow you, after
the party was over; what more could you
make them do? Hypnotized into place,
set in staunch motion by bells ringing all
over the goddamned place, what gave?
The wildness of lying in the New England

grass, deep into the night, seemed to tell me
we'd never find out. What you would do
with your tribe would be your secret, ribald
or righteous, just as I'd retreat invisibly
from this crew back to Center City, Becky
back to her brahmins, Talia back to Rhode
Island, God knows where, and the rest.
What we meant there that night was funny,
kiddies let loose to party all night, yet
kicked in the ass by fate to acknowledge
that when a group creates a frequency in
the universe, it can linger in space for
a long time, humming its tune, smoking
its dope, carrying the river, making it earth.

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